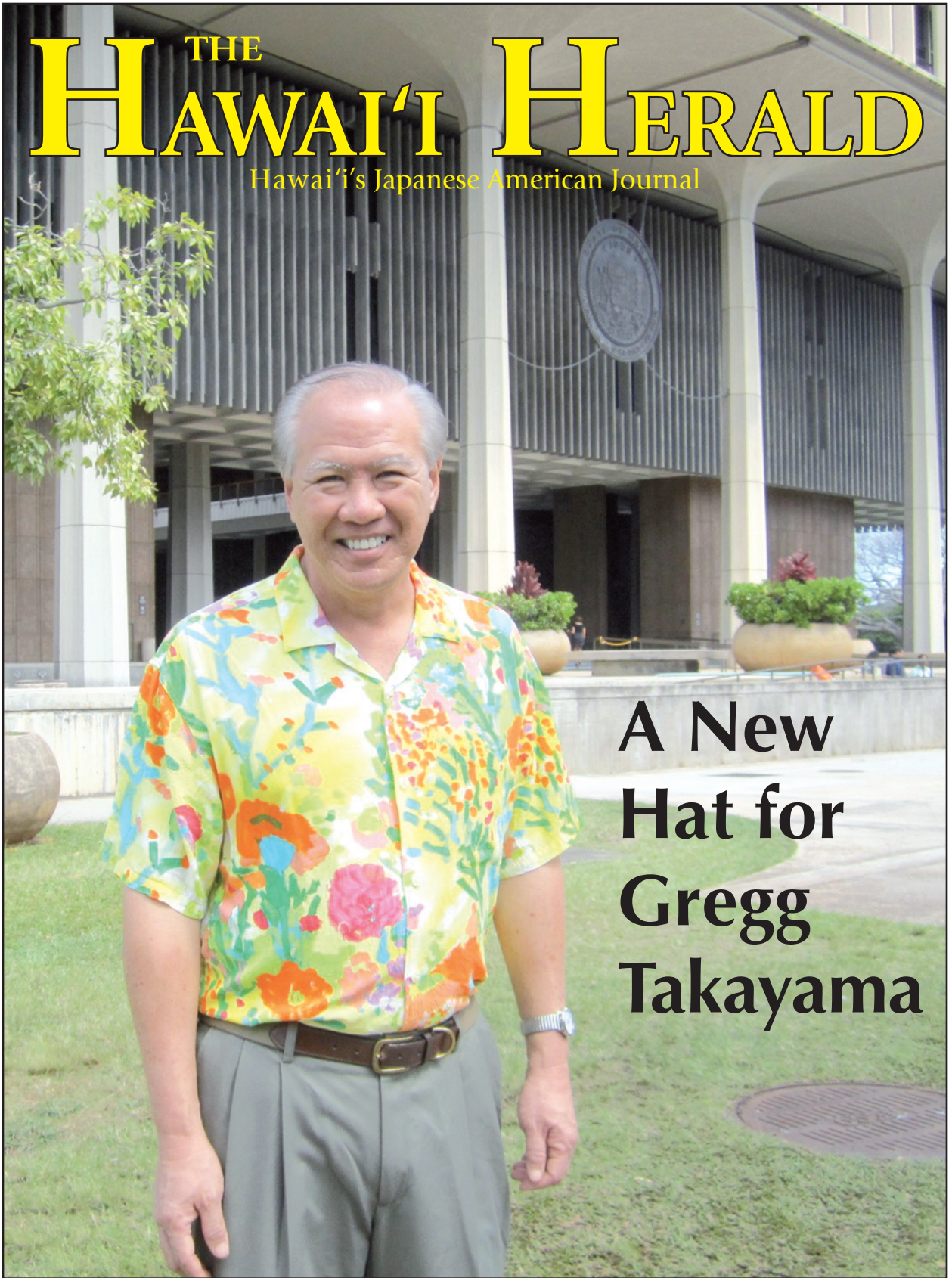


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**A New
Hat for
Gregg
Takayama**

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COVER STORY

A NEW HAT FOR GREGG TAKAYAMA

Paul Nishijima
Special to The Hawai'i Herald

Every day, you would drive to work and see the Capitol dome . . . gleaming in the sunshine, and it's such an inspiration that you would be . . . parking your car near a symbol of America, and you're doing it every day. It still gives me goosebumps when I think about it." — Gregg Takayama

There is no dome gleaming in the sunshine where Gregg Takayama parks his car these days. But he does go to work in a building that Hawai'i residents recognize as the symbol of government in the Islands — the Hawai'i State Capitol.

For virtually every day of his life since graduating from college in 1974, Takayama either covered government as a reporter, or worked as a spokesperson for some of the state's most visible government leaders. Last fall, he decided to pursue a different view of government — from the inside — working on behalf of his neighbors in the newly created state House District 34 (Pearl City, Waimalu and Pacific Palisades) and articulating his own concerns. The first-time candidate sailed to victory in the August primary and had no opposition in the November general election. In January, Gregg Takayama was sworn into office along with 11 other House freshmen. His election marked the culmination of nearly 40 years of work that afforded him unique perspectives of Hawai'i's political landscape.

Takayama was born in Waialua on O'ahu's north shore. His father, a World War II veteran of the 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion, subsequently moved his family to Kalihi Valley, where Gregg attended Kalihi Elementary, Dole Intermediate and Farrington High School, graduating in 1970. He earned his bachelor's degree in journalism from UH-Mānoa, where he was editor in chief of the campus newspaper, *Ka Leo*.

In his senior year, he scored a valuable internship with the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*. Takayama proved himself and was hired as a reporter fresh out of UH. And there he remained for four years until his journalism skills attracted the attention of Hawai'i's senior U.S. senator, Daniel K. Inouye, who made him the offer of a lifetime. Takayama and his wife Linda packed up and headed for Washington, D.C. The year was 1978.

What did you do there?

I was a press secretary . . . mostly involved with the press back home in Hawai'i. There were dealings with the national press as well. At that time, he was still rising in the Senate. He did deal with the Iran-Contra hearings (1987), and at the end of my tenure there, he did deal with [being a] national celebrity. The most thrilling thing is, here I am in my 20s — to hear my words that I had written for a speech coming out of the mouth of a national figure was quite a thrill.

How would you describe your experience working in the senator's office?

One of the things that I take away from my experience in D.C. was that while Senator Inouye was venerated in Hawai'i, he was also greatly respected by his fellow congressmen. I remember many times, senators like Senator Ted Kennedy or congressmen like Representative Tip O'Neal, would speak to him in such respectful tones. And they would turn to me, the kid next to him, and say, "You should be honored to be working for such a distinguished man." And I'm sure they were saying that not for just my benefit.

Describe what it was like during the Iran-Contra hearings?

Here he was at the center of the political spotlight and also in the press spotlight. Very often, he would do the Sunday talk shows — sometimes twice a month. Composed and measured at all times. And that is what earned him a lot of respect from his fellow senators — never lost his cool — a man of the Senate.

Even though he was criticizing a Republican president, how did the Republican senators regard him?

One of the things about the Senator was that he was as much respected among his Republican colleagues as his Democrat ones. In fact, sometimes his Democrat ones resented the fact he paid as much attention to the Republican ones as the Democrat ones. In fact, his closest friend in the Senate was Senator Ted Stevens from Alaska.

In 1990, after working for Sen. Inouye for nearly 13 years, the Takayamas decided it was time to return home to Hawai'i to raise their two daughters, then 4 years old and 6 months old. "We wanted them to grow up in the atmosphere of their grandparents and their cousins here in Hawai'i," he said.

Prior to leaving Washington, however, they had met with then-Lt. Gov. Ben Cayetano, on a visit home. Linda had worked for Cayetano when he was a legislator. When Cayetano heard that they would be moving back, he offered Gregg a job as his press secretary. Takayama accepted the offer and spent 1991 to 1994 as Cayetano's spokesperson.

What was it like as Lt. Gov. Cayetano's press secretary?

He was quite an active lieutenant governor. Besides the A-Plus Program, he headed the task force to examine the Department of Education's administrative structure — whether to keep its present set-up or have a district-by-district school board.

It was a crucial political time because he was setting the stage to run for governor. He had actually broken politically with Governor Waihee at the time over a couple of things, but principally over the nomination of Sharon Himeno to the state Supreme Court . . . But one of the takeaways from my experience working with Lieutenant Governor Cayetano: People respect you for telling the truth.

Takayama remained with Cayetano until his election as governor in 1994. He then joined the state Department of Public Safety as its spokesperson.

During your tenure, prisoners were shipped off to the Mainland?

The first [airplane] shipment of prisoners to the Mainland happened under Governor Cayetano — they were sent to Texas. It happened at midnight at



Since 1974, Gregg Takayama either covered government as a reporter, or worked as a spokesperson for some of the state's most visible government leaders. Last fall, he decided to pursue a different view of government. In January, Gregg Takayama was sworn into office along with 11 other House freshmen. (Photo by Paul Nishijima)

Honolulu Airport, and I was there. This was the first time that we had shipped off 300 prisoners, convicted felons, to the Mainland. So it happened in utmost secrecy in the dead of night, police escort, deputy sheriffs, a huge caravan of buses from Hālawā Correctional Facility to the Honolulu Airport. It remains very vivid in my mind. Now it's a matter of routine, but at the time it was something that was never done before. Who knew what would happen? Would they try to escape? Would family members help them escape? But no one knew how it would really go. Fortunately, it all went smoothly.

Did Gov. Lingle expand it?

She expanded the inmates we had on the Mainland significantly during her tenure, because I think we're up to about 2,000 or 3,000 now.

Now Gov. Abercrombie wants to bring back the prisoners from the Mainland. What changed?

I think he recognizes that there are economic benefits to having inmates here, and there are as well social benefits, because every inmate is going to return to society. And returning to society means returning here in Hawai'i. You need to prepare for the transition back to society by providing them with social skills, work skills and the ability to sustain themselves in the community. That can best be done in the community that they live in. That's why it makes sense to return them here in Hawai'i, and in order to do so, you have to do it in a gradual transition.

It was during Takayama's tenure as public safety spokesperson that his candidness and poise in front of cameras appealed to Jim McCoy, his former UH journalism classmate and *Star-Bulletin* colleague. McCoy, now a partner in Ho'ākea Communications, had been promoted to news director at KHON TV and needed to fill his old position as political reporter.

"I went after him because he had that experience working in national and local political circles," McCoy said.

COVER STORY/Continued from page 1



Rep. Gregg Takayama, second from left, was among the dignitaries participating in the traditional groundbreaking ceremony for the new Aiea Public Library. Pictured from left: Baron Baroza, acting branch manager, Aiea Public Library; Takayama; Rep. Aaron Ling Johanson; Norman Mizuguchi (former state Senate president); Gov. Neil Abercrombie; Claire Tamamoto, president of Aiea Community Association; Sen. David Ige; State Librarian Richard Burns; architect Glenn Miura and Marvin Buenconsejo, representing U.S. Sen. Mazie Hirono. (Photo courtesy Hawaii State Public Library System)

"I reject the old school thinking that once you work for a politician you are forever tarnished as a reporter. It's the breadth of experience I looked at. We had a need for an experienced, proven and fair reporter who had institutional knowledge."

What McCoy didn't know about Takayama was his taste for what he described as "loud aloha shirts!"

Mark Matsunaga, who was the news department managing editor, recalls viewers calling the newsroom to comment on Takayama's colorful aloha shirts. Takayama blamed his affinity for bright colors on having had to wear bland-colored suits for almost 13 years in D.C.

Matsunaga's friendship with Takayama goes all the way back to their sophomore year at Farrington High School and continued through college and at the News Building, where they became friendly rivals: Matsunaga worked for the Advertiser, and Takayama and McCoy worked across the hall at the Bulletin. The three were reunited in the KHON newsroom when McCoy hired both Takayama and Matsunaga.

"Gregg was an assignment editor's dream," Matsunaga said, adding that Takayama consistently came back with first-segment stories for the evening newscast. "He owned his beat — knew what was going on; didn't need the assignment desk to tell him what to cover. He always looked for meaningful angles and how a story affected the viewer. He wasn't satisfied to just report on a staged event or PR handout, which too many of today's reporters seem to be," Matsunaga said.

What was it like interviewing your former boss, Gov. Cayetano?

He was, and still is, a very blunt-spoken person. So believe me, he didn't treat me any differently than he did any other reporters. He had a big financial crisis at the time because, of course, the economic situation was bad. He had to make a great deal of budget cuts, wrestling with the public employee unions and legislators. It was a tough time for him and the state.

What was it like covering Gov. Lingle?

She was very skilled in dealing with the news media. She was very polished, very often in contrast to Cayetano, who tended to be off-the-cuff and candid. She was very much measured and well-rehearsed in many of her appearances, press conferences and statements. That's not a negative. . . . I guess what I'm trying to say is that there was a difference between her style and that of Cayetano.

As a reporter asking the questions, what's your attitude towards politicians when covering a story?

Because I had knowledge of the government process, or government in general, I tended to be more skeptical rather than accept answers at face value. What do they really mean when they say something? What are the realistic chances of something happening when they promise it would? I tried to be, as a journalist, more probing than accepting the surface answers.

One of the things you have to remember about

reporters is that their area of knowledge is vast, but about an inch deep. Because you deal with so many different issues, you don't have the time or the ability to deal with issues in depth. The bottom line for a spokesperson for an institution is to protect the institution — that's reality, that's how it is. The good reporters will be able to dig a little deeper beyond what's given to them at face value.

I wish that the press paid more attention to government. Very often, the public receives a distorted view of government and politicians because the only coverage is during a scandal or [when] something bad happens, and there is really not enough recognition of the influence that government has on day-to-day life. And there are — and I'm not saying this because I've been elected to office — a great many hard-working politicians at the Legislature, who are dedicated and want to do good.

Takayama worked in television news until 2004, when he was offered a new challenge as director of communications for the University of Hawai'i's John A. Burns School of Medicine, which was just settling into its new home in Kaka'ako.

In 2006, Takayama was recruited as communications director for acting UH-Mānoa Chancellor Denise Konan, who was succeeded by Dr. Virginia Hinshaw two months later. In late 2009, Hinshaw asked Takayama to direct the campus' Advancement Team, with responsibility for communications, marketing, government relations, the website and special events.

During my time there, the shooting at Virginia Tech happened. And what we developed . . . was a sophisticated high-tech way of notifying students, faculty and staff of emergencies. We developed a system that involved email notifications, telephone tree line alerts, working with broadcast TV and radio stations — using a multifaceted approach to alerting the community to emergencies on campus, which is still in use right now.

Usually, we dealt with the press in a crisis situation because there was not interest in covering us in a day-to-day situation. So most of my preparation was dealing with an emergency. There are deeper stories to be told on all levels of state government and the university — and I wish they were.

Takayama remained with the Advancement Team until 2012, when reapportionment of the state's voting districts opened a new door for Gregg Takayama.

When did you decide to run for office?

Running for office was not in my plans until last year, when reapportionment created a new state House district in Pearl City. I saw this as an opportunity to apply my background in government and communications to public service in a different role and, fortunately, the voters of Pearl City agreed to give me this chance.

I thought I had been fairly active in the community, with community organizations. I knew about most public issues facing the community and state through my experience as a journalist and at UH. And so I thought, why not give it a shot.

I discussed it with my wife because there were some economic ramifications. It meant I had to go on leave without pay — from the time that I filed as a candidate until the time of the election, which meant from June till November, we were without my salary. But we thought it was worth it, so I gave it a try. I was fortunate enough to be elected in the primary, and there was no opponent in the general. And that's how I came to the state House.

How would you describe your district in terms of demographics?

By and large, it's a mixed ethnic community. Mostly Japanese American, mostly elderly — it has one of the larger populations of senior citizens in the state. Working-class community. A community where neighbors have lived next to each other for generations. A very stable community where people tend to live and stay with their parents and children. It turns out there are many multigenerational houses in Pearl City, as I learned walking door-to-door.

Because of the high number of elderly in the district, how do your bills address your concern for elder care?

The Baby Boomer Generation, of which I'm a member, is heading towards retirement. And, by the year 2030, which is only a little more than a decade and a half away, we're going to increase our senior citizen population by almost two-thirds.

What that means is that the majority of people, when they reach their elder years, will need long-term care services of some kind. It can range from an occasional living assistance to 24 hours skilled nursing care. And, at the upper end, skilled nursing care can cost \$125,000 to \$127,000 a year — and no one can afford that.

What does your bill, House Bill 1, address?

HB1, the first bill introduced this session in the House by me, would provide for a study for long-term care programs: what's needed, what's affordable, and how can it be paid for? It would fund, with \$380,000, an actuarial study as well as a study by the state Office on Aging on what would be a long-term care program for the state of Hawai'i.

Ten years ago, the Legislature actually passed what is called a social insurance program, where working people would pay into a program and after 10 years would qualify for long-term care benefits. And that was actually enacted by the Legislature, but vetoed by Governor Lingle, and so it died with her veto.

House Bill 2, which I also introduced, calls for a public awareness campaign throughout the state on the need for long-term care. A very small percentage of our working population, less than 10 percent, has some form of long-term care insurance. It's most affordable in your working years, least affordable as you get older and closer to the need for it.

The burden of long-term care is basically on Medicaid, which is half paid for by the state and half paid for by the federal government. The state share for Medicaid last year was \$200 million, and it's only going to go up in the next decade.

I call it a "perfect storm" because we will be flooded with seniors — the "silver tsunami" — so to speak. We already have a shortage of long-term care facilities, and what is available is unaffordable to most working people here in Hawai'i.

In addition to long-term care legislation, I've also introduced bills to help protect the elderly against financial abuse, add funds for coordination of Alzheimer's and dementia services and create a statewide falls prevention program — one of the top causes of disabilities among the elderly.

Gregg Takayama's new role as a state representative is perhaps his most important one to date — the one in which he can affect change.

Mark Matsunaga, who now works in public information for the government, believes Takayama made the right choice.

"Hawai'i needs Gregg's talent and smarts, his knowledge of politics, the Islands and their people. I'm not keen on former journalists going into politics, because that's often the last resort of a fading celebrity with no other marketable skills. In this case, however, Gregg brings an expertise in politics and policy-making, a vision for Hawai'i and a feel for real, everyday working people that is sorely needed in today's governing circles."

The Capitol dome still gleams in the sunshine, reminding state Rep. Gregg Takayama of lessons learned from a special mentor.

And, what is Takayama's takeaway experience from working with Sen. Inouye?

My one big takeaway from working with Senator Inouye was, number one, he was closely attuned to the needs of his constituents. The working model in our office was that we always take care of our constituents; and number two was that he said you get a lot more done if you don't care who gets the credit. So these are the two things I came away with, and I think about them often at the State Capitol. **HR**

Paul Y. Nishijima is a free-lance writer with a background in film and video production. He has an M.A. in film from San Francisco State University with an emphasis in screenplays.